<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JA96Fba-WHk>

**Operant Conditioning**

Operant conditioning is a form of learning described and researched by many behaviorists, most notably Edward Thorndike and B. F. Skinner. The central principle follow: “a response is strengthened—and thus is more likely to occur again—when it is followed by a reinforcing stimulus (a **reinforcer**).”[[1]](#footnote-0)

Edward Thorndike and B. F. Skinner were the forerunners of the theory of operant conditioning. Thorndike’s early work involved placing cats inside problem boxes and leaving food outside. The cats escaped from the box by inadvertently accessing the right mode of exit the first time, and learning what was most effective the subsequent times. He called this the *law of efficiency*: “Any act that produces a satisfying effect in a given situation will tend to be repeated in that situation.”[[2]](#footnote-1)

While Thorndike created the basis for operant conditioning, it is B. F. Skinner who is recognized for developing most of the other major components of this theory. Skinner originally majored in English, but by 1928 had enrolled in Harvard to pursue psychology. [[3]](#footnote-2) “According to Skinner’s view, consequences determine to a great extent whether a person will repeat the behavior that led to the consequence.”[[4]](#footnote-3) It was Skinner’s idea of consequence that shaped his take on how to condition behavior.

Operant conditioning can occur only under two conditions:”

1. The learner must make a response; the learner must do something,
2. The reinforcer should be contingent on the learner’s response—that is, it should occur when, and only when, the desired response has occurred. [[5]](#footnote-4)

**Positive vs. Negative Reinforcement**

**Positive reinforcement** occurs when a particular stimulus is presented, or *added*, after a behavior, and the behavior increases as a result.

Positive reinforcement does not necessarily mean that the reinforcer will be a pleasant or desirable, but that a new stimulus will be introduced to the environment.

Example: A teacher’s praise for a well-completed assignment, or giving a child extra time to be with friends once the chores are done.

**Negative reinforcement** brings about the increase of a behavior through the removal of a stimulus, typically an undesired one.

Again, like positive reinforcement, the term negative does not imply a value, but indicates the subtraction of a stimulus from the environment.

Example: A student completes an essay before the dues date to decrease the stress created by the assignment.

1. ed. psych 312 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. hg 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. hg 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. hg 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. ed psy 312 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)